No Strings Attached
Luke 15:11-32
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In an issue of Trends magazine I recently came across an article that was highly critical of preaching, particularly the repetiveness and monotony of the themes. The author estimated that in her life time she had heard nearly 4,000 sermons and she commented: "...Every year the same subjects....every year another sermon on the prodigal son...Jesus, I agree, had a lot of good things to say; but I doubt if even He would enjoy hearing one of His own parables rehashed every year for forty years." (Trends, March/April 1974, P.10)

The author has a point. It is probable that at least once a year you will hear a sermon on the Prodigal Son. And yet there is another word to be said. The late Paul Tillich, perhaps the finest theological mind of our generation, at one point concluded that the major theological problem was the fact that the traditional words of faith had ceased to communicate anything because of over-use; and he recommended that we simply stop using them. But late in his life Tillich changed his mind. Listen to these words which he wrote:

"...there is a mysterious fact about the great words of our religious tradition: they cannot be replaced...There are no substitutes for words like sin and grace. But there is a way of rediscovering their meaning, the same way that leads us down into the depth of our human existence...there they must be found again by each generation, and by each of us for himself." (A.D. Sept. 1972, P.37)

That is why the prodigal son keeps appearing in sermons: - because the parable deals with two ideas that are at the heart of the Gospel - namely, Sin and Grace.

Every time I hear the parable I remember that old story about a Sunday School class that had spent a morning discussing the Prodigal Son. At the end of the hour the teacher said:-"When the parable is over, everyone is happy but one - who is that?" A young hand went up and voice announced, "The fatted calf!"

As literature the parable is a masterpiece. Actually, it's three parables woven into one. William Barclay calls it the "greatest story ever told". It is the story of a loving father. It is the story of a young son who was conspicuously prodigal. It is also the story of an older son who was less conspicuously but just as surely prodigal. It is, throughout, a story about human sin and divine grace.

The law held that if a man had two sons the elder was to receive two thirds of his estate; the younger son - one third. It was not uncommon for a man to divide his property before he died. So it was, in this story, that a younger son asked for and received his portion: cattle, property, jewels, loans outstanding; liquidated it all and left home. We don't know where he went, but in every way it was a "far country". Rather quickly he ran through his resources and when famine struck was reduced to servitude - "feeding a rich man's swine". Only a Jew knows the terrible shame indicated by that statement. He was separated - cut off - not only from home, security, safety, the love of his father - but also from himself. He had become something that he could not stand. He "came to himself", the text reads.

And so he planned an elaborate confession and decided to return - as one of his father's servants. But his father was waiting - and when he saw his son coming, ran down the road to meet him, embraced and kissed him. Instead of saying "I told you so", a banquet of reunion was ordered. If sin is symbolized by the separation from the Father's house, then grace is reunion.

Now let us admit at the outset that we have difficulty with that - not as literature - but as experience, for the father's love for his son was unaltered by the son's prodigality. The sequence in the story is essential. The father was waiting and ran down the road. He took the initiative. Before the son had an opportunity to recite his well-rehearsed confession, his father reached out and embraced him. And then the words came tumbling out: "Father, I have sinned; forgive me." Reconciliation, this story teaches, precedes repentance. You don't win forgiveness by saying "I'm sorry". You say "I'm sorry" because you realize how much you are loved: that your father loved you while you were away - that you were accepted and forgiven long before you asked.

Abraham Lincoln knew the power of that idea. In the waning days of the Civil War Lincoln was surrounded by people who could not wait to punish the Confederate States and execute the Confederate Leaders. When asked how he planned to deal with them he said simply, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." There is the very power of God in that attitude: but it is difficult and not always palatable - as he tragically discovered: and as we today are experiencing as we attempt to deal responsibly with those thousands of Americans who are literally in a "far country" by reason of conscience or draft evasion.

Theologically,we are talking about sin and grace: sin as separation: grace as love which overcomes separation..."love with no strings attached". If the parable is to be trusted the Gospel of Jesus Christ is precisely that God loves us - as that father loved his son. To paraphrase the Psalmist, "God does not keep a score-card of our sins". Rather, when we come to ourselves, when we know that we are fully human only in relationship with Him, when we return - the slate is wiped clean. We are loved and accepted and forgiven. That is the Good News.

But someone is still outside. When the story ends the elder brother is separated - sulking, in fact. Which is to say that one can be prodigal without ever leaving the premises. He, after all, had every reason to feel good about himself. Who could help but compare his maturity and stability with the outlandish behavior of his little brother? And so, when the wayward brother returned, and instead of getting what he deserved was the guest of honor at a banquet, he whined, "What about me? It isn't fair. I've been working in the fields while that son of yours has been living it up - with your money." And because of that he becomes a prodigal. His father loves him too - but he decides to stay away, because his sense of justice and propriety has been offended.

Jesus had difficulty with people who sounded and acted a lot like the elder brother in that parable. At the beginning of the 15th chapter of Luke, great crowds of people were following Jesus, and when "tax collectors and sinners" were seen to be prominently among His associates the Scribes and Pharisees began to whine, "This man receives sinners and eats with them". The parable of the Prodigal Son is actually the last of the three stories Jesus told in response to the self-righteous whining of the Scribes and Pharisees.

They were understandably upset by what was happening. After all, they were the righteous ones: they had made a profession out of religion. They obeyed the religious law to the letter. They prayed and fasted and gave one tenth of all they had to the poor. They are much maligned in contemporary sermons: but, in fact, they were learned, respected, generous people - who, in the chaos of Roman occupation, kept alive the traditions and dignity and hope of the Israelite nation.

And here comes Jesus of Nazareth - inferring that He was the Messiah of Israel - and instead of spending His time with them - instead of patting them on the back for their conspicuous virtue - He notoriously showed up in the company of tax collectors and sinners.

For "tax collectors" substitute "traitors". For"sinners" substitute "poor people, prostitutes, beggars, fishermen": people who had no time for nor interest in the formalities of institutional religion: people who had forgotten their tradition and completely disregarded religious law, not to mention propriety. Before we deal harshly with the Scribes and Pharisees we must superimpose that data on our situation and see how it feels.

In the context of the New Testament, then, we begin to see the parable as a pivotal point in the conflict between Jesus and the Religious authorities: a story that illustrated graphically the difference between the Gospel of Grace and their practice of religion. They were the Elder Brother in the story: they could not have missed the point.

George Arthur Buttrick comments: "Jesus was compelled to relate the aftermath of the Prodigal's return so that Pharisees of that and every age might have a mirror whereby to see themselves and God". (Parables, P.195)

For, tragically, religion always seems to have trouble with the idea of grace. Regardless of where it begins, religion always seems to end up being pharasaical: providing a device through which men can feel good about themselves at the expense of other men. Too often, within Christianity God's love for all men somehow comes out in the form of a narrow favoritism toward those particular people who know what particular things to do and say in order to please God.

We are learning how it happens psychologically. Paul Tournier, Swiss Psychiatrist and Theologian,observes that "from infancy on all trauma is connected with this doubt about being loved...The child has the impression that his parents love is conditional: that they will love him on the condition that he is good." (Guilt and Grace. P.189)

Tragically, many parents confirm their child's worst fears - by saying, "Mommy won't love you if you do that."

Tournier suggests that the universal human anxiety is inevitably projected into religion. "They picture God as one who loves them only on the condition that they are good." Once you have bought that - the idea that God's love is conditional - someone must define the conditions. Someone has to draw up the rules - the obeying of which will cause God to love us.

That is what a lot of religion becomes. That is what the Pharisees and Scribes had made of the faith of Israel: a legal system, adherence to which resulted in righteousness. That is what Christianity had become at the time of the Reformation: a system through which people could persuade God to love them: a system in which there was no room for grace.

And today, too much religion seems intent simply on attaching strings to the Grace of God. - "Say it this way: have this particular experience: believe these doctrines: do this - don't do that - and you'll be saved. God will love you." Tournier calls the modern religious scene "a wilderness of multiplied guilt".

Once you're convinced that God has to be persuaded to love you and that you know the necessary things to do in order to persuade Him, you are very likely to spend a lot of time worrying whether you are doing enough. You are also very likely to look down your nose at all those poor sinners who don't see it that way and aren't doing those things and consequently cannot be loved by God as much as you are. Your responsibility with them is not so much to announce the Good News - but to convince them to believe and behave as you do..

Reinhold Niebuhr put it eloquently: "Moral pride makes virtue the very vehicle of sin; a fact which explains why the New Testament is so critical of the righteous..."

The Church of Jesus Christ must constantly be alert to the fact that religion has within it the seeds of Pharsaism. Most of us can't really identify with the younger son in the parable. He's refreshing, to be sure. Buttrick suggests that if you had to chose one of them as a companion on a weekend camping trip most of us would pick him over his older brother. But we're not ordinarily prodigal in the way he was. We're not flagrant abusers of the common morality.

But we have felt smug and superior to those who insist on violating our ethical norms. We've been known to look suspiciously at the welfare recipient, the unemployed, the drug addict - and to feel good that we aren't that way. We know a little bit about the prodigality of the Elder Brother.

There is, it seems, an inherent human incapacity to live with the idea of grace. Perhaps it's because we have so rarely seen it in ourselves. We prefer to earn our way: in our relationships with others: in life: and with God. We prefer a neatly structured system in which people are loved by God for being good and hated by God for being bad: a system based on our theology - our morality - our way of life. And the very discomforting thing about this parable is that the Elder Brother could not cut through that system long enough to understand the depths of his father's love for him. His own arrogance had walled him off from grace. His father said: "Son, you are always with me. And all that I have is yours." But he didn't even hear it.

And yet we know what it is to be separated. No man is immune from that. We have felt estranged and lonely and cut off from other people. We know what it is to fail our highest intentions for ourselves - to be less than we are and could be. And deeply in our hearts we know what it means to be in a far country - in that self-inflicted exile, from the Father's love. We know what it means to worry about whether God really does accept us and forgive: we wonder if we really are saved...

God loves us. He comes down the road to meet us before we have a chance to say "I'm sorry". He comes out into the field to meet us in the midst of our resentment and says "Ilove you".

Jesus Christ was crucified because that idea was so radical - so offensive. His death is the symbol of the depth of God's love - for He loved and forgave even those who were crucifying Him.

It is still a radical idea. It is still very good news. If there is one thing in life about which we no longer need to worry it is the grace of God. We are safe..We are free. God has given us what some men spend a lifetime trying to earn. God loves us - and there are no strings attached. Amen.